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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 008188

SIPDIS

NSC STAFF FOR POUNDS
DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA AND DRL

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KDEM EG

SUBJECT: LEADING CIVIL SOCIETY GROUP COMPLAINS OF GOE
HARASSMENT

Classified by ECPO Minister Counselor Michael Corbin for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a joint message from Embassy Cairo and APP Alexandria.

1. (C) Summary: An October 22-23 meeting in Alexandria of non-governmental democracy activists organized by the Cairo-based Ibn Khaldun Center (IKC) was disrupted by several audience members protesting the presence of foreigners, including U.S. and European NGO representatives. The disruption included overturning tables and breaking water glasses in an apparently coordinated attempt to intimidate the participants and force a cancellation of the meeting. IKC chief Saad Eddin Ibrahim refused to suspend proceedings, and obtained a GOE pledge to protect and allow the meeting to continue. American attendees at the event included representatives of the National Endowment for Democracy, the Carnegie Endowment, the National Democratic Institute, and the Congressional Research Service. Some of the participants suggested that the GOE was behind the disruptions, but the evidence is far from conclusive. End summary.

2. (SBU) Shortly after the October 22 commencement of the proceedings to establish the "Egypt Democracy Support Network" (EDSN) at Alexandria's Metropole Hotel, two audience members objected to the presence of foreign participants and began overturning tables and throwing water glasses in an apparent attempt to scuttle the meeting. The two men, identified as a member of the Alexandria local council (and former Tagammu party activist) and the Secretary General of the Alexandria branch of the "Misr Alfayn" (Egypt 2000) party, appeared to be acting in coordination across the room from one another. At the time of the incident, a number of local reporters also burst into the room, as though on cue. GOE State Security officials posted at the hotel hosting the event acted with pronounced caution, first refusing to expel the protesters, and later advising the conference organizer to cancel the meeting to avoid further trouble. A third protester, described by some attendees as a known NDP activist, attempted to rally a crowd outside the seaside Alexandria hotel to protest the proceedings inside, but his efforts met with little more than lackadaisical curiosity by passers-by, tourists, and young couples out for a stroll.

3. (C) After a period of deliberation by conference participants and a conversation between IKC's Ibrahim and State Security officials, Ibrahim decided to continue the meeting. Ibrahim told APP Alexandria Principal Officer (who attended portions of the first day's proceedings as an observer but was not present for the disruption itself) that while Alexandria State Security officials recommended he call off the meeting, their Cairo superiors agreed with Ibrahim that doing so could have troubling public relations consequences for the GOE and thus offered their support for the continuation of proceedings with a renewed pledge of cooperation. (Ibrahim asserted that he had been in contact with State Security about the event for "months.") Nevertheless, Ibrahim and other Ibn Khaldun representatives were convinced that the protest was instigated by GOE elements, and that State Security's initial ambivalence indicated at the least a permissive posture toward the disruption, if not outright complicity.

4. (SBU) The protesters' objections centered on the presence of international participants in the conference. One protester noted that he had not fought in the Sinai in the October 1973 war so that he could see foreigners debating Egypt's political future. He added that if there was to be a meeting about Egypt then foreigners should be asked to leave, and if foreigners wanted to participate then the meeting should take place outside Egypt. When thanked for his perspective, but told that the meeting had long been planned as an international support mechanism for the creation of the EDSN, he became irate and verbally abusive.

5. (C) While many participants viewed the protesters as fringe figures who were merely annoying distractions, several of the international participants viewed the event similarly to Ibrahim. National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman told APP PO that he was convinced that the regime sought to disrupt a democratic proceeding, and vowed action to intensify support for the EDSN and denounce the GOE's

actions. Other U.S. participants included representatives of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; the Transatlantic Center of the German Marshall Fund; the National Democratic Institute; and the Congressional Research Service. The meeting proceeded without major incident after the initial disruption and continued for a second day on October 23. The three individuals who disrupted the October 22 proceedings continued to lurk around the Hotel Metropole until the conclusion of the meeting, however, and the organizers chose to conduct portions of the second day's meetings in their private suite, instead of in the meeting room.

16. (C) Comment: Unsurprisingly, many of the Egyptian participants asserted that the circumstantial evidence suggested the work of the GOE security services, which may have been seeking to discredit the meeting and its objectives. On the other hand, several participants also suggested that the Ibn Khaldun Center's less-than-transparent leadership of the conference may have led some of the other Egyptian groups in the meeting to engineer the protests, either from resentment or as a warning to perceived IKC dominance of reform initiatives in Egypt. Negad El Borai (protect), who heads the United Group, which is a MEPI grantee, further noted that the GOE's previous character assassination of Ibrahim--over the course of a series of trials from 2000-2003 which eventually resulted in Ibrahim's vindication by Egypt's highest court--meant that all of his activities have become a lightning rod for the xenophobic, nationalist outbursts that are common in contemporary Egyptian debates about reform. End comment.

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